

OCTOBER 1918.

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SUDAN NOTES AND RECORDS

VOL. I.

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PRICE 15 P. T. (3/-).

Annual Subscription 50 P. T. (10/6).

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NIKAWNG'S PLACE IN THE SHILLUK RELIGION

BY REV. D. S. OYLER.

The Shilluks being without a written language have lacked the means to collect and verify their religious beliefs. When asked as to their beliefs they refer to the old men, who have given them the traditions. Defects of memory, different sources of information, and the personal beliefs, and desires of the narrator, tend to give a diversity of belief. 173
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The Shilluks profess belief in a Supreme Being. He is greater than Nikawng or any other king. He is the Creator of the world, but he is far distant. They are not able to come into close contact with him, and feeling that he is far beyond their reach, and dismayed by the disasters, which come to them apparently from the hand of God, they feel the need of some one to stand between them and God. Nikawng is the chief intermediary, though others stand between them and God, either for good or evil. The distance of the Creator, and the nearness of the intercessor often tends to give him the greater power and influence. 776

They never pray to God without invoking an intercessor. A typical prayer in which Nikawng is invoked with God can be given. 782
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"We praise you, you who are God. Protect us, we are in your hands, and protect us, save me. You and Nikawng you are the ones, who created, people are in your hands, and it is you Nikawng, who are accustomed to assist God to save, and it is you who give the rain. The sun is yours, and the sea (river) is yours, you who are Nikawng. You came from under the sun, you and your father, you two saved the earth, and your son Dok, you subdued all the peoples. The cow (for sacrifice) is here for you, and the blood will go to God and you. Now hear all of you, you the people of the earth, and save us. The person who rejects your talk will die."

This veneration of Nikawng may possibly be a bit of ancestor worship. 776
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for they occasionally pray to their ancestors in the same way, and also to the dead chief of the village. The chief is looked upon as a father. Infrequently they pray to the spirit of some departed friend. When a person has a pleasant dream about a departed friend, a prayer is frequently addressed to his spirit, as he is well disposed. The mother, brothers and sisters may also be invoked.

When prayer is to be offered to the spirit of a dead person, a female sheep is brought to the grave. If the person making the prayer is not the son of the deceased, the right ear is cut from the sheep, and tied to the ankle of the person making the offering, and the wounded ear is washed in a gourd of water, so that the blood remains in the water, and then the water is poured on the grave, and part of it is thrown in the eye of the sun (that is thrown out in front of the sun). It is for God so that it will go to him. The sheep becomes the property of the heir of the deceased. The prayer is offered before the ear is cut off. If the son offers, prayer is made to God and to the deceased, and then the sheep is killed as soon as the signs are right. The sheep is cut open, and the contents of the stomach and bowels are thrown on the house of the offerer, and then the meat is cooked. The meat can not be tasted until the oldest living wife of the deceased takes some of the soup in a small gourd, which is covered with a small native mat, and pours it on the grave. The soup that remains in the gourd is poured out in front of the house. The old men are then called to take the lead in eating the sacrifice. Women of all ages may eat of the sacrifice, but only the boys and old men of the males may eat, as no man of military age may eat of it. When the feast is finished the bones are carefully collected, and thrown into the river, as it would be bad if the bones of a devoted sheep should be gnawed by a dog.

While there is no set form for the prayer, and its length is determined by the sheep, yet they are all very similar, and the following is an example.

"We praise you, you, who are God, it was you, who gave me my father, who begot me. I pray to you also my father. Why did you go to the earth, and keep silence? Was not this your house before? When evil comes to your house, why do you not pray to God? Your house is given as a plaything to the people. You went to the presence of God, and we thought that nothing evil would befall us again, after you left. Now help,

God. Why do you leave the responsibility of saving on God alone? God's spirit becomes tired (from work), and he leaves people, and they die. Why do you not see and save us? You went to the ground, and you have forgotten that a person from another house does not guard yours.

The prayer is continued in this strain until the sheep, responding to the anxiety of nature, relieves itself, and that is taken as an omen that the prayer has been heard, and a favourable answer will be given. That which comes from the sheep is put on the grave. If the omen is delayed, the sheep may be taken to a house, and left there to be brought out another day. The prayer life among the Shilluks is developed by adversity, as they seldom if ever pray, when in prosperous circumstances.

Their veneration of Nikawng does not blind their eyes to his faults. When a prayer has been offered to Nikawng, and the answer is not given as had been hoped, the disappointed one curses Nikawng. That is true especially in the case of death. When death is approaching, they sacrifice to Nikawng and God, and pray that death may be averted. If the death occurs the bereaved ones curse Nikawng, because he did not exert himself in their behalf. Apparently they do not pray to him that the condition of the deceased may be happy after death. He is sometimes spoken of as the son of God, but it is not definite, as they also use the same term in regard to his father, and one or two others.

They maintain that Nikawng still lives. He is even now watching over the Shilluks, and should he die the whole race would die, but in spite of their belief they have a sacred house for Nikawng, which is similar to the sacred house in which the later kings have been buried. This fact weakens their statement that they believe that he still lives.

The departed leader comes back to his country on certain occasions. At night he can be heard in the sacred house, which has been dedicated to him. He sharpens his spear, or beats with his club, but when the attendants enter the house, no visible form is to be seen, but they know that the sounds were made by him. He may also ring a bell that is in the sacred house. When he is heard in the sacred house, the Shilluks say: "Nikawng walks in his country". They rejoice because it is an indication that he is actively watching over his people.

When the rains do not begin as soon as the natives think they should,

776 the chief of the district offers a sacrifice to Nikawng so that the rains may
782 come. After the prayer has been offered, and the rain comes, if it comes
821 with a rushing sound they say that Nikawng walks in the storm, and the
rushing sound is made by his passing.

643 - Once the departed king returned so that he could be seen by the eye of
766 man. The first kings did not die, but ascended. At last a time came when
775 the kings were to be identified more fully with the people, and they were to
776 be buried. The proper burial of the first king to receive that attention
from his subjects, was of such great importance that Nikawng returned to
give minute instructions as to how the king should be buried. Some say
that he actually appeared in the flesh. Others say that he appeared to a
certain old chief in a dream, and made known to him how one of his kingly
descendants should be buried.

776 At certain times the old woman, who has charge of his sacred house
778 places food in it for him. At the time of new moon the food is placed in his
782 house, and may be offered to him one day, or four days. Very early in the
792 morning the food is taken out, and eaten by the attendants. They say that
Nikawng has tasted it. Should the offering entirely disappear in the night
it would be taken as a serious omen. Milk is also placed in the house with
the food. Should the old woman keeper of the sacred house dream of the
king during the month, she places an offering of food in his house.

643 Similar offerings are made to the other kings, and also they may be
769 made to an ancestor.

776 When the harvest is beginning, before the people may eat of their grain
782 they must take an offering of their first fruits to Nikawng. After Nikawng
has been given his taste of the first fruits the people may eat freely. An
offering of the first fruits is also taken to each of the sacred houses of the
other kings.

769 Many of them take an offering of the first fruits to the grave of an
ancestor, usually the father. When offering to a father the grain is made
into a sort of batter, and poured out on the grave. The man then says that
he has given his father a taste. The worship at the family shrine dies out
when the immediate family is all gone. In the case of the kings it is kept
by all the people.

775 The power of Nikawng is upheld to some extent by a class of religious
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devotion. By some means the spirit of the king is supposed to enter into people. They sometimes say that he is taken by the wind king. The spirit of any of the kings who did not die may enter a person, but the greater part profess to be acting for Nihawang, though Dak has a numerous following. People thus possessed are said to be servants or slaves of the particular king claiming their allegiance.

The beginning of the possession is indicated by hysteria. When a person is first taken he walks about with his head swaying from side to side, and his eyes shut. Often they look as though they are going to fall, but they are always able to maintain their balance. In the night they wander about or else ward off sleep by singing songs. When a person first shows these signs, they send for a recognized servant of that king. The spirit is able to tell the people what king he represents.

The servant of the king treats the case. He makes a fire, and puts a vessel of oil on it. The oil is permitted to boil, and then the patient is taken near the fire. A head is put on the forehead of the person to be treated. The person in charge of the case puts one hand on the victim's head. With the other hand he seizes his hand, and thrusts it into the boiling oil or butter. If the patient is burned and cries out, and tries to run away, the possession is said to be a light case, and curable. In that case the dung of a dog is brought, and burned. The patient is then put under a cloth, and the ashes of the dog's dung, and fire are also put under the covering. The spirit is then said to be driven out. If that patient has a second attack, the spirit cannot be driven off again. If the patient is not burned by the oil, the possession is said to be complete, and measures are taken to initiate him into the order of the servants of the king. Two sheep are killed, and their skins are prepared to be worn by the patient. Beads are fastened on the forehead, and about the ankle, and a string of ostrich egg shell beads is put about the neck. A spear is then placed in the patient's hand, and boiling oil or butter is placed on his forehead. The king is then revealed by hysterical actions on the part of the new servant of the king. The neighbours give presents of ornaments to the new servant of the king and the person who had charge of the case gives him a guard. A sheep is also given, and its right ear is cut off, and beads are fastened to it. The ear is then worn. The servant of the king in charge of the case gets a

756 good fee. It will not be less than two sheep, a fighting spear, a fish spear, a hoe, and a cloth. The patient is then assigned to a separate house.

Both men and women are eligible to become servants of the king, but [542] the women predominate. This ceremony does not release a woman from [513] her husband, but when they become old they may wander about, and follow other men.

People who are not in sympathy with the ceremony are not readily admitted to see the performances. Some say that the hand is held in the boiling oil or butter, but others say that it is hardly touched to the oil.

An indication of the fact that the power of Nikwang among the Shilluks is not as great as their professions would indicate, is furnished by comparing the servants of the king with the witch doctors. They work along the same lines, but the powers of the witch doctors are greater. The possessed are supposed to be holy, but they are among the most lustful of the people. They make greater claim to personal piety than the witch doctors, but their lives are no better.

[462] The women of this class are much more active than the men, who are usually idlers.

[726] They are able to give protection, for when a fight is imminent one is called to sprinkle ashes on the warriors, and Nikwang is invoked thus, "Nikwang, this village has your ashes on it, do not give it to death".

[718] They are also able to foretell future events. They often profess to be surprised at their own messages, and they are able to get into communication with the dead.

The chief work of the servants of the king is to cure disease. The so-called cures are nearly always of a magical nature.

775 The spirit of the king may not always be active in the afflicted person,
776 but it comes and goes. When a servant of the king under the power of the
756 spirit makes a statement he is not responsible for what he says, as it is merely a manifestation of the king, but if he does a wrong act under the same guidance, he is held responsible.

756 The actual workings of the servants of the king are not easy to witness, as they do not like to work before a hostile gathering. The tales of their cures told by eye witnesses vary, as they are influenced by their faith or lack of faith in the power of the medium. A few illustrations may be given

of the working of the servants of Nikawang. The stories have been told by 756
different Shilluks, and while they vary in minor details they have been
essentially the same.

In one form of healing they use a plant. The root is taken, and 755
chewed very fine by the healer. He then puts his mouth to the nostril of
the patient and causes the chewed plant to pass from his mouth to the
nostril of the sick person. He then puts his mouth over the nose of the
other, and blows very hard so that the medicine will be blown into the
head of the patient. If the victim should succeed after the treatment, he 757
will recover. If he does not, he will die.

The servants of the king are especially qualified to cast birds out of
people. Often, when a person is asleep, a bird perches on him, and later
gains an entrance into his body. When the healer is called, she takes the
sufferer to an ant-hill, and compels him to lie on the mound. A chicken
is killed, cut open, and thrown out on the plain for the dispossessed birds
to enter. Then a lighted torch is passed around the head of the patient in
a circle. When they start home the healer follows, and fans the air with
her clothes to scare the birds away. Some other woman carries a spear,
which she thrusts into the air to kill the birds. When the entrance to the
enclosure about the house is reached, a spear is stuck into both sides of it.
After the patient enters the house the healer strikes the house and sticks
a spear near the door. That spear is to keep the birds away, and is to 756
belong to the healer when the case is cured. However it is usually taken,
even when the cure is not effected, as it is to compensate for the lost time
of the healer. The fee for such a treatment is a spear, a hoe, a cloth, and
two sheep one of which is killed. This treatment is for the birds, which
enter children. Adults are afflicted by a different kind of bird, which must
be cast out in another way.

Colds which affect children are treated by taking the patient to an ant- 755
hill near the river. A small grass house is constructed, and the child, and
its mother placed within. The house is then set on fire, and the servant
of the king cries "The house is on fire". The mother rushes out with the
child, and hastens to the village. The healer follows fanning the child,
with her clothes. The mother and child enter the house. The healer enters
the house, and then turns with her face out of the door, and fans outward

755 to keep the disease from entering. The mother is warned against looking back.

[753] When a child cries persistently, with no apparent cause, they reach the conclusion that he is being drawn by one of the kings. The servant of the king is called, and given a fee of a sheep. The parents say they want to know, who is drawing the child. The first thing to do is to take cowrie shells, and string beads on them. Each shell has a different coloured bead. The shells are named for their kings, and also for the deceased grandparents of the child. One shell is also put in for the child. The shells are all taken in the hand, and thrown out on a skin. When they fall if another shell touches that belonging to the child, it is being drawn by the spirit of that king or person. The child is then given the name of the person drawing it, and a cure is effected. If at the first attempt no one is indicated the test is repeated until some one is indicated. All the people in the room then cower, and pray to the drawing spirit as the leader directs.

756 The servants of the king claim the power to converse with the dead. When a spirit is to be called the medium goes into the house with the relatives. She goes to one corner of the room and retires behind a screen. The door is closed to make the room dark. She then takes a gourd with some grain in it and twirls it to make a noise that will call the spirit of the departed. The spirit of the king then takes powerful possession of the medium, and she speaks in a peculiar voice. The usual thing is for the spirit to greet the assembled people, and they reply. The spirit then says: [761] "Where I am it is nice, but I was killed by a certain person (naming him) or I would not have died." The death was caused by a charm cast on the victim. "I will kill that man, do not quarrel with him. When I finish

[762] greeting you I will return." Sometimes such a message causes the relatives of the deceased to try to kill the one who cast the charm.

756 An instance of their working is often given in this community. Two men made a trip to the Nuer country. On the return trip one of them, 756 named Shol, was separated from his companion. The other man concluded 757 that he had been killed by a lion, and returned with that report. The people of the village mourned him as dead, but they waited two months. Then a servant of the king was called. She went through the usual forms, and then exclaimed: "Ah the man". The spirit greeted the people, and

they made answer. The spirit then said : « I was eaten by lions, the lions were two, had the lion been one I would not have been eaten, for you know me, that I am strong ». The people replied : « We know that you are strong ». He continued : « I am sorry for my mother only ». At that she wept. Then he beat the drum, and he said « I return ». His brother alone doubted, and said : « My spirit is strong, my brother lives ». He was chided with unbelief. The next morning they buried a wooden effigy of Shol, and had a mourning dance for him. In the midst of the dance he returned, and wanted to know who had died that they were mourning. The dance was stopped. The medium was humiliated, and refused to attempt to work in other cases.

Such cases as the foregoing are usually treated by the women. The men servants of the king treat the river sickness. The patient with two sheep is taken to the river. The sheep must be male and female. The head of the mob is put under the water. It is then taken out, and its four feet tied together, with its head between the front feet. The healer then puts it into the river, and as it is carried off by the current it takes the sickness with it. The female sheep is the fee of the healer. They then go to the village and kill a sheep for a feast.

When a servant of a king begs he says : « The king is begging you ». and if his requests are modest they are granted.

In death the servants of the king are honoured by the same kind of burial as is accorded to a chief.

They look upon it as a form of spirit possession. The spirit is good, or at least not as malignant as some of the other spirits that may take possession of a person. A failure in no way lessens their power, as the people are sure that some other healer would have been successful. While a successful cure brings great glory to the healer.

This class typifies a longing of the native mind. They are seeking some power to bridge the gulf between the finite and infinite. The power that belongs to God is to pass to the king, and then by his spirit to be given to his servant, who is to use it for the good of the people.

The mediums prey upon the people. Often they seem to be sincere in the belief that they have the power claimed, though just as often they seem to realize that they are deceiving the people.

000 That such a class can not meet the needs of the people is proven by their seeking to the medicine men. The longing in man for knowledge of the Highest which elevates him to the highest good, when directed in the right channels, may also be used by a class seeking power to hold him down in ignorant servitude, and fetter him with superstition's shackles.

D. S. OYLER.